DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 712 EC 305 933

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TITLE	Critical Support Services for College Students with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	13p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; College Faculty; College Students; Consciousness Raising; Focus Groups; *Helping Relationship; Higher Education; *Institutional Role; *Learning Disabilities; *Services; Social Support Groups
IDENTIFIERS	*Academic Accommodations (Disabilities); *Testing Accommodations (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the outcomes of a study that used focus groups to investigate services and accommodations that were important to college students (n=33) with learning disabilities (LD). Students were from five Midwest colleges and universities that offered programs specifically for students with LD or who made special services ad accommodations available. The institutions included two community colleges, two independent colleges or universities, and one public university. The five most beneficial learning disability support services and accommodations, based on the criteria that were mentioned by the most number of focus group participants, included coursework accommodations, testing accommodations, LD staff members, peer support groups, and tutors. Note takers, books on tape, and having papers proofread were coursework accommodations mentioned most often. Extended time to take a test, taking a test in a quiet room separate from other test takers, and having someone read the test aloud to the individual were the testing accommodations mentioned most often. Other results from the study emphasize the importance of self-esteem training for students with LD, publicity and student awareness of LD services, and faculty programs to increase awareness and to provide information regarding instructional and institutional accommodations. (Contains 18 references.) (CR)

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Critical Support Services for College Students with Learning Disabilities

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Critical Support Services for College Students with Learning Disabilities

Statement of the Problem:

Between 1978 and 1985, there was a tenfold increase in the number of college freshmen with learning disabilities (Price, 1989, Shaw, Norlander, & McGuire, 1987). According to Henderson (1992), over 34,000 full-time college freshmen reported having learning disabilities (LD) in 1991, a figure that has doubled since 1985. According to the U.S. Department of Education (as cited in Vogel & Adelman, 1993), approximately 160,000 full and part-time students enrolled in two or four-year colleges, graduate schools, and doctoral degree-granting institutions reported having a learning disability. These individuals represent the fastest growing category of students with disabilities seeking access to higher education, and learning disability college programs are rapidly expanding to meet their needs (McGuire, Harris, & Bieber, 1989).

Nelson and Lignugaris-Kraft (1989) reviewed the literature regarding postsecondary programs for students with LD and found a significant range in the type of services utilized on college campuses. Many colleges and universities offer little more than generic support services for students with learning disabilities. In a survey of practices and attitudes among postsecondary LD service providers, Yost, Shaw, Cullen, and Bigaj (1994) found that services were usually developed in a haphazard manner, and while attempts were made to meet students' needs, they often had little or no theoretical or philosophical grounding.

Rationale:

In 1986 it was reported that there were 2,000,000 students with LD currently receiving services in the nation's public schools, and that more than half would seek postsecondary education sometime during their lifetime (Shaw et al., 1987). Increasing percentages of students with LD will be accessing postsecondary education. According to Johnson (1993), McGuire,

with LD will be accessing postsecondary education. According to Johnson (1993), McGuire, Norlander, and Shaw (1990), and Vogel and Adelman (1990), there is limited research to indicate the most effective type of LD program for college students with learning disabilities. It is important to the success of postsecondary LD programs to find out from the individuals affected whether or not their needs are being met. The purpose of this research was to identify the LD services and accommodations that are beneficial to students with learning disabilities in selected midwest colleges and universities, according to the students participating in the study.

Methodology:

A multisource search was conducted to locate research regarding services and accommodations for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions through the ERIC database, Dissertation Abstracts International, journals in the specific areas of academic services and learning disabilities, and bibliographies of related literature. Twenty-two articles and books were reviewed regarding beneficial practices, accommodations, and services in postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities. The literature consisting of beneficial support services and accommodations included substantiated studies and opinion or theory-based recommendations. Fourteen variables were cited as beneficial services or accommodations. There was little research available, however, regarding whether specific practices and accommodations supported by expert opinion are beneficial to students from the point of view of students with LD.

The researcher in this study utilized focus groups to identify the services and programs that are beneficial according to postsecondary students with learning disabilities. According to Brotherson (1994), Krueger (1988), and Morgan (1988), focus group interviews are compatible with key assumptions of the qualitative paradigm. One important characteristic of focus groups is

that information produced in a group discussion format will be richer, more complete, and more revealing than that which can be obtained in individual interviews, surveys, or questionnaires (Brodigan, 1992). In a focus group setting, student participants can be asked not only to indicate their level of satisfaction with particular services, but also relate personal experiences that led to their opinions (Jacobi, 1991). When the topic being discussed is of a sensitive issue, such as learning disabilities, focus groups can provide a security and comfort to participants and encourage candid responses (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). An individual can find comfort in the fact that his or her feelings are not greatly different from those of peers, and that he or she can expose an idea without being forced to defend it. The individual is more likely to be candid because the focus is on the group rather than the individual (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In a relaxed group setting where participants sense that their opinions and experiences are valued, participants are more likely to express their opinions and perceptions openly (Byers & Wilcox, 1988).

The focus groups in the present study included students with LD from five midwest colleges and universities that offered programs specifically for students with LD or who made special services and accommodations available. The following types of institutions were chosen for the study: two community colleges, two independent colleges or universities, and one public university.

The most frequently used sampling procedure in focus groups is purposive sampling, wherein a researcher selects subjects based on predetermined criteria to the extent that they can contribute to the research study (Vaughn et al., 1996). The researcher sent a letter to directors of LD programs at five institutions inviting them to participate in the research study. Information regarding administrative components of their LD programs, such as the length of time the

program has been in existence, how the program is administered, how many students are served by the program, and how the program is funded, was also collected. LD support service staff at the participating institutions sent a letter to each student who utilized the support services to let them know that the study was available if they wished to participate. Students who wanted to participate contacted the researcher by telephone or mail. Because the focus group participants were volunteers, no effort was made to determine that a variety of learning disabilities was represented. Thirty-three students participated in the focus group discussions and information regarding participants' age, gender, race, educational major, academic level, and type of learning disability was also gathered.

Results:

As the researcher read through each of the transcripts of the interviews, comments regarding services, skills or accommodations for students with LD at the postsecondary level were coded in the margins and later analyzed. While an accommodation's level of importance to a focus group seemed related to the frequency with which it was mentioned, its value was judged by the number of different participants within a group who commented on its importance. Some participants were more vocal than others, and the researcher believed the opinions of more and less vocal participants should be considered equally valuable. Therefore, the number of different focus group participants commenting on accommodations was tracked rather than the frequency of comments about an accommodation's importance.

The five (5) most beneficial learning disability support services and accommodations, based on the criteria that they were mentioned by the most number of focus group participants, include coursework accommodations (78.8 percent of the participants), testing accommodations (75.8 percent), LD staff members (63.6 percent), peer support groups (45.5 percent) and tutors

(45.5 percent). Other results from the study include the importance of: 1) self-esteem training for students with learning disabilities; 2) publicity and student awareness of LD services; and 3) faculty programs to increase awareness and to provide information regarding instructional and institutional accommodations.

Discussion:

Twenty-six students (78.8 percent of all focus group participants) mentioned coursework accommodations and 25 students (75.8 percent of all participants) mentioned testing accommodations as being beneficial to their collegiate success. Note takers, books on tape, and having papers proofread were coursework accommodations mentioned most often by the focus group participants. Extended time to take a test, taking a test in a quiet room separate from other test takers, and having someone read the test aloud to the individual were the testing accommodations mentioned most often. Typical comments from students include: "The books on tape help 100 percent so that I can actually comprehend something that I am reading" and "I get note takers because I just can't figure out what is more important than other things." The focus group participants from the public university were the only individuals to voice problems with some of the testing and coursework accommodations. Some of the difficulties included the fact that there were no separate rooms available for private testing and that it often took six months to a year to record the books on tape.

Perhaps one of the most important findings from this study was that in each focus group the LD staff had an extraordinary impact on students' perceptions, attitudes, and successes. In response to the questions regarding the importance of an LD coordinator as a service and the helpfulness of the LD staff, the director or support staff were always mentioned in a positive manner. An LD staff member was mentioned by 21 (63.6 percent) focus group participants. At

each institution, an LD staff person functioned in a counseling capacity and also as a tutor. LD staff responsibilities, according to the focus group participants, included teaching students learning strategies, working on students' self-esteem, setting up study or peer groups, reviewing course schedules, reviewing homework, or intervening in matters relating to faculty and parents. Many students met with LD staff at least weekly, and sometimes more often. Some student comments include: "At the beginning of the class she has us write down how we think we are doing in our classes or just positive things that have happened to us during the week" and "Sometimes when books are not on tape, such as more specific books within my major, [LD staff] will read them and put them on tapes." While all of the participants from the public university had positive comments regarding LD staff, many mentioned the lack of time LD staff were able to give them. One individual commented, "I have only good things to say about the LD staff itself. I think the LD program is understaffed and underfunded. Sometimes there is just no one that can see you when you need to see someone."

Peer support groups, along with study groups, were mentioned by 15 students (45.5 percent) as being a beneficial service. Several students commented about peer support groups in the same context as a way to build self-esteem, or as a social outlet. Typical comments include: "It is kind of a bonding group, I think, because we all know each other and we all know that we have the same problem" and "There is a whole bunch of things we can learn from each other." The participants of the public university did not know of any peer support group available to them, and commented that the focus group session was the first time they had ever been together with other students who had a learning disability.

Tutors were also mentioned by 15 participants (45.5 percent). Many focus group participants received tutoring from other students who were not necessarily LD specialists,

although a few participants did receive tutoring from an LD staff person or specialist. Most students spoke positively about their tutors, including those students receiving tutoring from peers. Several students did mention that they preferred a tutor who was familiar with learning disabilities. One comment included: "We need tutors that can deal with our disabilities... if we have to get up and move around, they get frustrated." The public university focus group participants experienced great difficulty with the student tutors that were available to them through a separate university program. The tutors wouldn't be available until six or eight weeks into the semester, at which time the students often had to drop the classes because they were too far behind.

Over one-third of the participants mentioned self-esteem, either as a characteristic that is important to them, or in a dialogue regarding their feelings about being in the LD program. Typical comments include: "To me, it has been devastating. I didn't want anyone to know I had a learning disability" and "It helped me a lot knowing what the problem was and not just going through school and thinking, well, I am dumb and stupid and I just can't get it."

Although counseling was the service cited most often in the literature, only 10 participants (30.3 percent) mentioned counseling in the focus group discussions. Counseling was usually mentioned in the context that it was available, but not necessarily that it was beneficial to them specifically.

Some services or accommodations thought to be beneficial by LD experts in the field were either not mentioned at all by focus group participants (ability assessment and individual education plans), or were mentioned only a few times, e.g., self-advocacy skills (4 participants, or 12.1 percent), social skills (4 participants, or 12.1 percent), services available all year (4 participants, or 12.1 percent), and program evaluations (1 participant, or 3.0 percent). Self-advocacy skills

were mentioned in terms of being able to talk to professors about necessary accommodations. Regarding the availability of LD services all year, the students that commented on this accommodation had been through a summer program specifically for LD students at that particular institution, and the students felt it was a worthwhile program.

There were also additional findings from the research and suggestions from focus group participants. While references to faculty were unsolicited, nearly half of the focus group participants commented on negative experiences with professors who would not accommodate them in class. One participant suggested that faculty awareness programs could be developed to educate faculty regarding working with students with learning disabilities, in addition to providing instruction on how to implement instructional and institutional accommodations.

LD services should be widely advertised around the campus, particularly at larger universities. The availability of LD services could be highlighted in application and promotional materials, publicized during college orientation, and advertised in student newspapers.

Finally, existing services can be improved. For example, some of the participants in the current study complained that tutors were difficult to arrange and unfamiliar with the problems facing students with learning disabilities. Another complaint from participants in the study involved the long time necessary to arrange for a book on tape. By conducting student evaluations of LD programs, colleges and universities can identify services in need of improvement.

Conclusions

It is imperative that institutions offer services and accommodations that are necessary to the academic success of a college student with a learning disability. The present research identifies services and accommodations important to thirty-three students participating in a study of five

midwest colleges and universities, but the results may be used to impact services at other institutions.

Services and accommodations found to be important to students with LD in the present study include coursework and testing accommodations, LD staff members, peer support groups, and tutors. Support or social peer groups should be developed for students with LD in all programs. Although the success of a support peer group depends on the involvement of the students participating, colleges and universities can facilitate their development and operation by providing assistance, facility space, and a coordinator. Institutions should recognize that LD staff are the nucleus of the program and students see staff as important to their academic success. While the literature emphasizes the need for staff to be specialized, LD "specialists" were not as important to the students as the availability of assistance, and the staff's commitment to students with LD.

Additional services or programs believed to be beneficial according to students include self-esteem training, faculty awareness programs, publicity and student awareness programs, and an evaluation process for the LD program. Findings from this research may be useful to colleges and universities, prospective students, parents, professionals in the field, and administrators who must set priorities for serving students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions.

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